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ABSTRACT

Peter Palmer's book "The Courage to Teach" sparked an interest in Quaker pedagogy in recent years. This paper sketches some ways in which Quaker principles inform what one educator does in his community college composition classes. The paper briefly describes the origins of Quakerism in the language of educators. It states that Quaker practice is not an authority-centered, instruction-based transmission of doctrine but rather a dialogic encounter, a mutual grappling with questions, a subtle blend of self-directed and peer-assisted cooperative learning. According to the paper, to run a class as a Meeting for Learning calls for a radical democratization of the classroom, a dismantling of classroom hierarchies, a decentralizing of control, as teachers learn to have power "with" their students rather than power "over" them. The paper finds that in a traditional composition class, the teacher maintains the locus of control in four areas: assigner of topics for composition; writer of formative comments on drafts; determiner of quality standards; and evaluator of how well students' final drafts meet those standards. The paper states that under Quaker pedagogy students are allowed much freedom to choose their topics--but a course must involve some sort of trajectory and unfold in some way. It explains that the first assignment in a sequence calls for a personal narrative exploring some time of internal struggle in the student's life, while the second movement in the trajectory involves some observing and reporting upon a place where people struggle in some way; the third movement is an immersion in a broader struggle, and the fourth movement is from "that" to "there." (NKA)

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Friendly Persuasion:

Quaker Pedagogy in a Composition Classroom

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I. Introduction

I have to confess to a bit of uncertainty about my audience here. I mean, what kind of people show up to a panel entitled "Silence and Query as Practices of Engagement"? These are Quaker code words, right? So let me see a show of hands, how many of you are connected to Quakerism in some way? Does anyone teach at a Quaker school?

Parker Palmer's book *The Courage to Teach* sparked an interest in Quaker pedagogy in recent years, and I am sitting up here now on the assumption that if you are the sort of person to attend a panel such as this, perhaps you come with a curiosity about Quaker practice. What I would like to do this morning is to sketch for you some of the ways in which Quaker principles inform what I do in my community college composition classes.

For the non-Quakers in the room--and, I suppose, for the Quakers in the room who perhaps have never quite thought about their spiritual practice in pedagogical terms--let me briefly describe the origins of Quakerism in the language of educators.

With the invention of the printing press, at the dawn of the Protestant era, people gained direct access to scripture without the need for ordained authorities to serve as intermediaries. The locus of control shifted, you might say: the old instruction-based catechism of the Church gave way to a new, self-directed study.

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A bit later, Quakerism came along to further challenge not only the need for trained clergy but even the need for received scripture. Recognizing that each seeker must look within for a source of his or her authority, Quakers dedicated themselves to a curriculum of radically independent learning--sitting in silence, without sermon, without scripture, but among fellow seekers, among friends.

Instead of indoctrinating each other with a list of catechistic answers, Quakers more clearly articulate the questions we need to ask ourselves and each other. The Greek root *kata* can mean *off* or *out*; *ekhein* means *to sound*. The *catechism* of Quakers, you might say, is not so much a *sounding off* with catechistic answers as it is a *sounding out* by the use of these queries.

Quaker practice is not an authority-centered, instruction-based transmission of doctrine but rather a dialogic encounter, a mutual grappling with questions, a subtle blend of self-directed and peer-assisted cooperative learning. As I hope to show this morning, my own classroom approach to the teaching of writing attempts in some ways to mirror that spiritual practice.

Some of you may be familiar with Parker Palmer's term "Meeting for Learning." In a nutshel!, he is describing a way of teaching that models itself after a Quaker Business Meeting, in which the teacher serves to facilitate learning but refuses to fall into the trap of doing students' learning *for* them.

To run one's class as a Meeting for Learning calls for a radical democratization of the classroom, a dismantling of classroom hierarchies, a decentralizing of control, so that teachers learn to have power *with* their students rather than power *over* them.

In a traditional composition class, the teacher maintains the locus of control in these four areas:

- assigner of topics for composition,
- writer of formative comments on drafts,
- determiner of quality standards, and

- evaluator of how well students' final drafts meet those standards.

In such a class as this, the students depend upon the teacher for pretty much everything. But our job, as I see it, is to help students not need us anymore. This is especially true in my case, since I am almost certainly the last English teacher my community college students will ever have. Since there are no more English teachers after me, I consider it my responsibility to wean my students from me—and that means turning over to them more and more of these loci of control. I know, full well, how easy it is to fall into the egotistical trap of fostering in students a dependency on their teacher. But the more they rely on the teacher to tell them what quality writing looks like and what difficult texts mean, the more students develop a kind of learned helplessness.

Power monopolies and hierarchies of all kinds die hard, and the instruction-based, teacher-centered pedagogy is no exception. Still, some of my efforts to decentralize authority in my classroom have been pretty well in synch with reforms underway within the teaching profession, quite apart from Quakerism. In particular, the first two loci of control have been challenged, respectively, by expressivism and by the workshopping movements of recent decades.

A Quaker pedagogy parallels these two early student-centered reforms--and suggests the next direction, as well: challenging the teacher as locus of control over the evaluation of student writing.

II. 1st Locus of Control

In letting go of this first locus of control, I want to allow students a great deal of freedom to choose their own topics. But I don't invite them to just write about *anything*. We call a course a *course* because it involves some sort of trajectory; it must unfold in some way. Otherwise it is not a course but just a random bunch of classes and assignments.

The trajectory of my freshman comp course--like that of so many other teachers--runs around the triangle of discourse, from writing centered in the self, toward writing about some

subject matter, and finally toward writing pitched for an audience. So we begin by "centering down," as Quakers say, and then methodically decentering, as Piaget calls it; the assignment sequence provokes movement outward, from *me* (expressive aim) to *that* (referrential aim) to *thee* (persuasive aim).

That alone is not at all unusual, but I dovetail that sequence with another trajectory: what Quaker scholar Paul Lacey calls the growth of the moral imagination.

If it is true, as we saw in the last century, that imagination can be used in the service of great evil by reducing human beings to abstractions, surely it must also be true that imagination can be used in the service of compassion by awakening us imaginatively and empathetically to the suffering of others.

So that parallel trajectory, the hidden curriculum you might say, goes something like this: the growth of human compassion begins in remembrance of and reflection upon one's own past suffering, then moves outward through witnessing and reflecting upon the suffering of others near at hand, and then extends beyond to the broader struggles of the human condition.

First Movement: Remembering and Reflecting

The first assignment in the sequence calls for a personal narrative exploring some time of internal struggle in the student's own life, from which she emerged a bit wiser, changed in some obvious or subtle way, never again quite the same person.

Now, my students are certainly no more spiritually awakened than yours. Todd--you know Todd, don't you?--Todd thought it would be fun to write about the time he had a great time drinking at a party but later rolled his truck in a ditch.

Overjoyed as I was to read yet another "I got drunk and wrecked my truck" essay, I encouraged Todd not just to look backward but *inward*. I tell my students I want to see not just a true story but a *Truth* story, a story that tells some Truth.

Todd's first bravado draft about wrecking his truck evolved into an honest personal confrontation with the true cost of alcohol abuse in his life.

There is an old Quaker tradition of using writing to sort the shards of experience, to introspect, to bring to bear upon remembered experience the transforming power of self-reflection. Quakers have been avid journal-keepers.

And beyond the value of *writing* these reflections, *reading* each other's stories helps us to pull off the bonds of egocentricity. We discover through the recorded thoughts of another person that the emotionally complex interior life we carry within us exists as well in other people--even in people seemingly quite unlike us. *Even in Todd.* This discovery is a small step out of our isolation and a giant leap toward our humanity.

If a classroom full of strangers must somehow transform itself into an intentional learning community, then telling our stories is an excellent place to begin.

Second Movement: Observing and Reporting

The 2nd movement in the trajectory of the course involves observing and reporting upon a place where people struggle in some way--perhaps with an outer oppression (an injustice) or perhaps with an internal bondage (an affliction).

Todd had to attend a DUI class after his wreck. The other people attending that class thought, just as Todd himself initially thought, that they were being subjected to an injustice: they didn't need such a class, they thought, the law was picking on them.

After spending an entire weekend with these people, though, Todd began to see their affliction more clearly--and began to see in *their* struggles echoes of his own. This is the moral imagination beginning to awaken.

Third Movement: Investigating and Explaining

The 3rd movement in the trajectory is an immersion in a broader struggle. Todd decided to stay with his earlier theme; he researched drinking among underage college students, both nationally and locally. He gathered statistics and expert testimony from published sources, and he conducted interviews with students, bar owners, and police.

This third assignment, it should be said, is not an opinion paper. It is a fact-finding mission. The student merely investigates a struggle and presents the various views on it.

The task is to hold in one's mind what others have said, neither championing it nor rebutting it, no matter how tempting it may be to give short shrift to views we do not share. The task calls for a kind of Quakerly generous listening; Peter Elbow has written about this and calls it "the believing game." In addition to listening generously to views they do not share, students must also play the doubting game with views too easily in sympathy with their own. The goal is to reach what Quakers call *discernment*--the point of genuinely understanding the various sides of the struggle.

Even more than the previous assignment, this one continues the trajectory from *me* to *that*.

Fourth Movement: Proposing and Advocating

The 4th movement is from *that* to *thee*.

In Quaker fashion, then, the assignment sequence begins in inward reflection, then moves toward discernment, and then toward outward action.

At this point, students are invited to join the public conversation, unbridled by my earlier insistence that their writing merely report neutrally. For this assignment, students must pitch their writing to a specific audience--a *thee*.

Todd--as much to his own surprise as to that of his workshop group--Todd wrote a letter to the city council, urging them to make all bars 21-only!

III. 2nd Locus of Control

That long digression about my assignment sequence was to show how I decentralize that first locus of control. Let me move on, now, to talk a bit about the other loci.

The blend of self-directed and peer-assisted learning at the core of Quaker pedagogy finds a comfortable home in the writers' workshops of many composition classrooms.

Central to both Quakerism and the workshopping movement is a critical shift in the notion of *authority*. In a comp class without workshopping, the teacher is the recognized authority. Workshops, by contrast, respect students as birthright authors--still wet behind the ears, certainly, but able to offer each other sound advice nonetheless, and with the developing sense to take or leave that advice as they choose.

In my own classes, I try to model the workshops after the Quaker tradition of a Clearness Committee.

Among Quakers, there is a custom of convening a group of trusted friends to help one sort through a difficult personal decision. This is not a group to give advice; the Clearness Committee listens carefully and asks careful questions to help their friend make *her own* choice.

As is true with a Clearness Committee, the members of a writers' workshop group must conscientiously uphold the writer's own authority in matters of improving her draft. The temptation may be strong to leap in and tell her where she has gone wrong and what she ought to do instead.

Teachers are no less susceptible to this temptation than workshop peers. I spend many hours per week conferencing with students about their writing, and it has been a difficult lesson for me to accept the fact that I can be a better writing teacher once I stop showing off to students how *I* could have written their paper better.

If a teacher--or a workshop peer--says to the student writer, "Do this, fix this, say this," the writer is soon dispossessed of her authority--indeed, her very *authorship*. She surrenders her sense of ownership. She receives direct instruction but at the high cost of disempowerment, so that this one specific piece of *writing* may be improved, but not this one specific *writer*.

A sign of a healthy workshop, as for a healthy Clearness Committee, is a lot more questions being asked than solutions being offered. In preparation for such workshopping, my students and I brainstorm together, in advance of the workshop day, what Quakers call "queries" to guide their workshop discussions. From our analyses of published models, we try to identify what works; and from *that* we phrase queries for ourselves.

So, for example, from studying published proposals, Todd's classmates discovered that the more successful ones tended to, say, address their opponents' likely objections. So they composed a query like, "How do our proposals address our opponents' likely objections?"

Because we have composed these queries ourselves, they do not strike students as merely "canned" questions, such as one might find in a composition workbook. Instead, they are *our* questions, and we can use them to focus our workshop discussions.

The workshoppers must constantly bear in mind that it is not their job to fix the draft for this writer, nor to tell the writer whether they think it is any good. Workshoppers must learn to refrain from *sounding off* about the draft in front of them and, instead, use the queries to *sound out* the author in front of them.

IV. 3rd and 4th Loci of Control

The teaching of writing has come a long way, in the past several decades, towards a more student-centered classroom. The expressivist movement challenged the first locus of control by encouraging student-generated topics for writing. The writing process and the collaborative learning movements, together, challenged the second locus of control as they spread the gospel of workshopping. Within a single generation, two of the four loci of control shifted from the teacher to the students.

But few teachers of composition have yet to take the next step: empowering students with control over evaluation. We have stalled, in a sense, at the point of "Protestant Reformation,"

reluctant to lay down our role as ordained clergy in the classroom, and more than a little desperate about preaching from our pulpits the scripture of state-approved standards.

But just as many schools and colleges are moving toward peer review of faculty instead of annual evaluation by the principal or dean, so too is peer review of students the next frontier toward a more student-centered curriculum.

To justify our resistance to such a drastic change, we will haul out all the same excuses we formerly used to defend against the two previous shifts: "students are not sufficiently trained to do the task properly," "it is the blind leading the blind," "it will inevitably lead toward mediocrity." But just as we have found that students *should* learn how to discover their own topics, and *should* learn how to help each other improve their drafts, so too will we find that students should be learning to evaluate each other's writing.

What I am proposing is not just a classroom strategy to ease the nasty job of grading a stack of papers every night and two stacks on weekends (though it offers that benefit as well). I see it as a radically democratic shift.

It requires a kind of Quakerly trust that students already have burning within them a flame of Truth and Beauty--however dim or obscured that flame may at first appear--and that they can, under our care and guidance as what Quakers call "elders," put their considerable insights to good use as they work toward a collective understanding of what quality writing looks like.

This is not to say that a teacher has no role at all in pointing the way toward quality; he patently does. But shining a lantern to point the way does not have to mean dictating the terms or, indeed, doing the work of students' learning *for* them.

With a little practice, a group of students can become quite adept at recognizing quality writing when they see it, just as we *all* had to do when we first became English teachers and faced our first mountains of papers to grade.

In my own classes, during peer review sessions, I make use of one of the signature customs of a Quaker Business Meeting: the practice of seeking non-coercive consensus within a group. I teach my students about the consensus process, and we apply it as we attempt to make a collective judgment about the quality of a stack of student papers from another section of the same course.

The best-kept secret in academia is that most of us learn best by getting a chance to teach others. Why not tap that power? Why not--to borrow Quaker language--awaken students' own "inward teacher"? Why not let every student have a chance to sit at the big desk? Just as the Quakers have long asserted that everyone, regardless of station, should have the opportunity to minister, so too should every student have the opportunity to teach--to offer advice to other student writers, to judge their efforts, to discovery experientially what quality looks like.

V. Conclusion

The next step toward a more fully student-centered composition classroom awaits us. But it involves seeing our role as *professor* in a whole new way. It requires a great transformative leap from seeing ourselves as hired to teach writing--to seeing oursevles as hired to help students learn to write. The difference is not merely semantic; it is the difference between enabling students' learned-helplessness and helping them to learn. It is the difference between holding forth as the authority and sending forth a new generation of *authors*.